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“Tough Watering Practices Now Needed”

The drought continues and its effects on Gulf Coast landscapes are mounting. I count 8 weeks without significant rainfall, and we began the growing season with little stored moisture in the subsoil due to below average rainfall last year.

Local farmers are experiencing even more serious matters. In this county alone drought is threatening the establishment of 40,000 acres of row crops. Some early planted cotton fields will require replanting when rains return. In the mean time, there is not enough soil moisture to plant and we are nearing the last planting dates that could be expected to yield positive economic returns.

You will undoubtedly read and hear more about the effects of this dry period on agriculture from Extension agents and others who are close to this industry. As gardeners we need to be aware of our unusually dry soil conditions and make some tough decisions about the wise use of water.

We are largely unprepared for such extended periods without rainfall because the Gulf Coast normally receives so much. Most of our irrigation practices are actually geared to supplement rain so when there is none, we see unfamiliar drought stress symptoms on lawns and gardens.

Consider going into a sustainable mode in the landscape until conditions improve. This means applying enough water to keep plants alive and well, but without encouraging excessive growth. Following are suggestions:

- First, cooperate if water use restrictions are announced in your area. Officials who are responsible for providing water sometimes face some hard choices, but they are often considering long term water quality and quantity issues.
- When irrigating, apply enough to thoroughly soak the root system and then wait until the soil begins to dry out before applying more. Avoid daily sprinklings. Frequent, light waterings on established plants can create extremely shallow root systems and disease

problems.

- Hold off on fertilizing until the drought has passed. Fertilization, especially with a product that contains nitrogen, can stimulate lush growth which requires more water to sustain.

- Raise the mowing height of lawns. A higher cut decreases the amount of moisture stress and allows the grass to develop a deeper root system.

- Use 2 to 3 inches of mulch on entire beds of shrubs, annuals and perennials.

- Cull plants that are growing poorly. Don't waste water caring for marginal or undesirable plants.

- Irrigate during the early morning hours if possible. Avoid watering during the hot part of the day or in the evening.

- Check your system and determine the time that is required to apply the right amount of water and if coverage is uniform. Established lawns should receive one - half surface inch and shrubs should receive three - fourths inch per application.

Such water conserving practices should be extended throughout the remainder of the growing season because a good rain or two won't bring soil moisture conditions to optimum levels. Our soils are so dry that an extended period of normal rainfall will be needed to reach even average conditions.

Question: My crape myrtles should have begun flowering by now. Why are they blooming so late this year?

Answer: See the above article concerning current drought conditions. Since flowering is the reproductive stage of the crape myrtle, requiring much energy, plants will sacrifice blooms in order to sustain themselves. Water each plant thoroughly twice per week until normal rainfall returns.